

## Secret Service

Being the happenings of a night in Richmond in the spring of '63

The Play by  
William Gillette  
By  
Cyrus Townsend Brady  
Illustrations by Edgar Bert Smith

Copyright 1912 by Dodd, Mead & Company

### CHAPTER XIV.

#### The Call of the Key.

This astonishing denouement fairly paralyzed Arrelford. With a daring and ability for which he had not given Thorne credit, and which was totally unexpected, although what he had learned of his previous career might have given him some warning, the tables had been turned upon him by a man whom he confidently fancied he had entrapped beyond possibility of escape!

His amazement held him speechless for a moment, but his natural resourcefulness came back to him with his returning presence of mind. He knew the futility of an attempt to struggle with his captors, he therefore decided to try to reason with them.

"Sergeant," he began, quietly enough, "my orders are—"

But Thorne would not let him continue. Having gained the advantage he was determined to keep it to the end and for that purpose he followed up his first blow, ruthlessly pressing his charge hard.

"Damn your orders!" he interrupted furiously. "You haven't got orders to shoot up everybody you see in this office, have you?"

This was too much for Arrelford, and he made a desperate plunge forward to get at Thorne, who took his wounded wrist in the secret service agent's face. The soldiers held him tightly, however, and Thorne continued hotly:

"Get his gun away, sergeant; he'll hurt somebody."

While the soldiers—who appeared to entertain no doubt and to have no hesitation whatever about obeying Thorne's orders, the latter evidently the military man of the two and his voice and bearing, to say nothing of his uniform, telling heavily against a civilian like Arrelford—were taking the revolver out of his hands, Thorne once more turned to the telegraph table. His blood was up and he would send the dispatch now before the whole assemblage, before the Confederate government or its army if no enemy.

Arrelford burst out in a last vain attempt to stop him:

"Listen to me, sergeant," he pleaded desperately, "he is going to send out a false telegram and—"

"That'll do," gruffly said the sergeant of the guard, shaking his fist in Arrelford's face, "what is all about, captain?"

"All about? I haven't the slightest idea. He says he comes from some office or other. I was sending off some important official dispatches here and he began by leveling off his gun at me. Crazy lunatic, I think."

"It's a lie!" said Arrelford furiously. "Let me speak—I will prove—"

"Here!" said the sergeant of the guard, "that'll do now. What shall I do with him, captain?"

"I don't care a damn what you do with him. Get him out of here, that's all I want."

"Very well, sir. Are you much hurt?"

"Oh, no. He did up one hand, but I can get along with the other all right," said Thorne, sitting down at the table and seizing the key.

"Stop him!" cried Arrelford, fully divining that Thorne intended to send the message. "He's sending a—wait!"

A thought came to him. "Ask Miss Varney, she saw him—ask Miss Varney."

But the old sergeant of the guard paid no attention whatever to his frantic appeals.

"Here, fall in there!" he said. "We'll get him out, captain. Have you got him, men? Forward then!"

Struggling furiously the squad of soldiers forced Arrelford to the door. Thorne paid absolutely no attention to them; he had forgotten their presence. Like his attention, his mind and heart were on the key again. But he was

lured to meet with still another interruption.

"Halt there!" cried a sharp voice from the hall, just as the group reached the door.

"Halt! Left face!" cried the sergeant in turn, recognizing that here was a superior whom it were well to obey without question or hesitation.

"Here is General Randolph," said the voice outside, giving the name of one of the high officers of the Richmond garrison.

"Present arms!" cried the sergeant of the guard as General Randolph appeared in the doorway.

Following him were some officers of his staff, and by his side was the im-

posing figure of Miss Caroline Mitford. The humiliation and indignation had vanished from her bearing which was one of unmitigated triumph. She threw a glance at Arrelford, which bode ill for that young man. The general entered the room and stopped before the secret service agent, who stood in front of the guard, although he had been released by the men.

"What's all this about?" he asked peremptorily.

Although he knew that something important was transpiring, and that the newcomer was a man of rank, Thorne never turned his head. At whatever cost, he realized he must get the telegram off, and from the look of things it appeared that his only chance was then and there. He did not care if the president of the Confederate States of America were there in person, his mind and soul were on the order. He was frantically calling the station he wanted, the one indicated by "Plan 3," and he had the doctored dispatch, to which he had pasted the secretary's signature, spread out on the table before him.

"What's all this about refusing to send out Miss Mitford's telegram?" began General Randolph peremptorily. "Some of your work, I understand, Mr. Arrelford."

"General!" cried Arrelford breathlessly. "They have arrested me. It is a conspiracy—" He turned toward Thorne. "Stop that man, for God's sake stop him before it's too late!"

At this juncture, Caroline Mitford turned from the room and joined old Martha in the hall, and disappeared. She had only come back with the general to punish Arrelford, but she did not care to have her precious dispatch made the subject of discussion before so many people.

"Stop him!" exclaimed the general. "What do you mean?"

It was evident that the dispatch was not to go out then. Thorne had not succeeded in getting an answer to his signal. He left the key, rose and saluted.

"He means me, sir," he said. "He's got an idea some dispatch I'm sending out is a trick of the Yankees."

"It is a conspiracy!" cried Arrelford. "He is an impostor—"

"Why, the man must have gone crazy, general," said Thorne coolly, holding his position by the table and listening with all his ears for the return signal.

"I came here on a case for—" expostulated Arrelford.

"Wait!" said General Randolph. "I will soon get at the bottom of this. What was he doing when you came in, sergeant?" he asked of the non-commissioned officer in charge of the guard.

"He was firing on the captain, sir," answered the sergeant saluting.

"He was sending out a false order to weaken our lines at Cemetery Hill, and I—Miss Varney, she was here. She saw it all," explained Arrelford.

"Miss Varney!" exclaimed the general.

"Yes, sir."

"The general's daughter?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what was she doing here?"

"She came to see for herself whether this man was guilty or not; whether he was a spy or a traitor."

"Is this some personal matter of yours, Mr. Arrelford?" asked the general suspiciously.

"He was a visitor at her house and I wanted her to know."

"Where is she now? Where is Miss Varney?" asked Randolph impatiently.

"She must be out there on the balcony," answered Arrelford. "I beg you to send for her, sir."

"Sergeant," said General Randolph, "step out on the balcony. Present my compliments to Miss Varney, and ask her to come in at once."

In a moment the sergeant returned.

"There is no one there, sir," he replied saluting.

At that instant Thorne got the long desired signal. Without a moment's hesitation, he turned to the key. He picked up the dispatch with his wounded left hand and with the other began to manipulate the sounder.

"She must be there," said Arrelford, "or else she's stepped into the next room, the commissary general's office, the window was open, tell him to—ah!" as the sound of the clicking caught his ear, "Stop him. He is sending it now!"

Mr. Arrelford's distress was so overwhelming and so genuine that something of the man's suspicion was communicated to the general.

"One moment, captain," he said.

Captain Thorne, of course, had no option but to release the key. He stopped sending and dropped the dispatch, saluting.

"Now, Mr. Arrelford," said the general, "what have you to do with the military telegraph department?"

"This is a secret service case; they assigned it to me, sir."

"What is a secret service case?"

"The whole plot to send the order. It's the Yankee secret service. He is a member of it and his brother brought in the signal tonight."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Thorne, "this dispatch ought to go out at once, sir. It came from the secretary of war and it is very urgent."

"Go ahead with it," said General Randolph.

Thorne needed no further permission than that, dropped to his seat, and once more seized the fatal key.

"No, no!" cried Arrelford. "Don't let him—I tell you it's a—"

"Silence, sir," thundered Randolph. "Do you know what he is telling them?" persisted Arrelford.

"No, do you?"

"Yes," returned the secret service agent.

"Wait a moment, Captain Thorne," said the general, impressed in spite of himself by this man's earnestness, which made him disregard all orders, commands and everything else.

"Where is the dispatch?"

Captain Thorne picked up the paper and handed it to the general, and then stepped back. He had played his last card. He played it desperately, boldly and well.

"Well!" asked the general, looking from the dispatch to the sounder, "what has he been telling them?"

"He began to give an order to withdraw Marston's division from its present position," said Arrelford, making a brilliant and successful guess at the probable point of attack in "Plan 3."

"That is perfectly correct," said General Randolph, looking at the paper.

"Yes, by that dispatch, but that dispatch is a forgery. It is an order to withdraw a whole division from a vital point. A false order, he wrote it himself. This is the turning point of the whole plot."

"But why should he write it himself? If he wanted to send a false order, he could send it without putting it down on paper, couldn't he?"

"Yes," admitted Arrelford, but he went on with great acuteness, "if any of the operators came back they would catch him doing it. With that order and the secretary's signature he could go right on. He could even order one of them to send it."

"And pray how did he get the secretary's signature to a forged telegram?" asked General Randolph.

"He tore it off a genuine dispatch. Why, general, look at that dispatch in your hand yourself. The secretary's signature is pasted on, I saw him do it."

"They often come that way, sir," said Thorne nonchalantly.

"He is a liar!" cried Arrelford. "They never do!"

"Thorne stepped forward impulsively, his face flushed at the word 'liar,' but he controlled himself.

"General," he said, "if you have any doubt about that dispatch, send it back to the war department and have it verified."

It was a splendid, magnificent bluff. So overwhelming in its assurance that even Arrelford himself was petrified with astonishment. He was morally certain that Thorne was a federal secret service agent and that the dispatch was a forgery, yet it would take but a few minutes to send it over to the secretary's office and convict him out of his own mouth. What could the man mean!

"That's a good idea," said General Randolph. He hesitated a moment and then turned to the guard. "Sergeant," he said, "take this dispatch over to the secretary's office and—"

At that moment, the key which had been silent began a lively clicking. General Randolph turned toward it, and Thorne made a quick step in the same direction.

"What's that?" asked the general. Thorne stood by the desk listening while the key clicked out the message.

"Adjutant General Cheney," he spelled out slowly.

"Oh, from the front, then?" said Randolph.

"Yes, sir," answered Thorne.

"What is he saying?"

Thorne stepped to the table and bent over the clicking key. "His compliments, sir," he read off slowly. "He asks—waiting for a few minutes—'for the resty—still another pause—'of that dispatch—he says it's of vital importance, sir, and—"

The communication which Thorne had made to General Randolph was in itself of vital importance. The general was too good a soldier not to know the danger of delay in the carrying out of military maneuver which was probably part of some general plan of attack or defense of which he was not privy. He made up his mind instantly. He took the dispatch from the hand of the sergeant and turned it over to Thorne again.

"Let him have it," he said decisively.

The captain with his heart pounding like mad sat down at the table and seized the key. Was he going to complete the dispatch? Was the plan to be carried out. Had he triumphed in the bold and desperately played game by his splendid courage, resourcefulness, and assurance? His eyes shone, the color came back into his pale cheeks as his hands trembled on the key.

"General!" cried Arrelford, "if you—"

"That's enough, sir. We will have you examined at headquarters."

At that instant Lieutenant Foray came rapidly into the room.

"Thank God!" cried Arrelford, as he caught sight of him. "There's a witness, he was sent away on a forged order, ask him!"

Another interruption, thought Thorne, desperately fingering the keys. If they would only give him a minute more, he could complete the order, but he was not to have that minute apparently.

"Wait, captain," said General Randolph quickly, and again the key was silent. "Now, sir," he said to Lieutenant Foray, "where did you come from?"

The lieutenant did not all comprehend what was toward, but his answer to that question was plain.

"There was some mistake, sir," he answered, saluting.

"Ah!" cried Arrelford, a note of triumph in his voice.

"Who made it?" asked the general.

"I got an order to go to the president's house," returned Foray, "and when I got there the president—"

Thorne made one last attempt to complete his message.

"Beg pardon, general, this delay will be most disastrous. Permit me to go on with this message. If there's any mistake, we can rectify it afterward."

He seized the key and continued sending the message as he spoke.

"No!" cried Arrelford.

General Randolph either did not hear Thorne's speech or he did not care, he did not care to prevent him, and he continued his questioning.

"Where did you get this mistaken order?" he asked.

But Arrelford, intensely alive to what was going on, interposed.

"He's at it again, sir!"

"Halt, there!" said General Randolph. "I ordered you to wait."

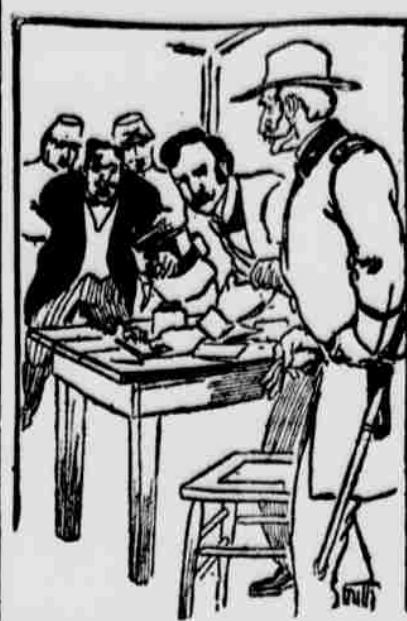
The dispatch was almost complete. Thorne ground his teeth with rage in his impatience. He had tried audacity before, he would try it again.

"I was sent here to attend to the business of this office and that business is going out," he said resolutely.

"No," said General Randolph with equal firmness, "it is not going out until I am ready for it."

"My orders came from the war department, not from you, sir. This dispatch came in half an hour ago," answered Thorne angrily, his voice rising, "they are calling for it at the other end of the line. It's my business to send it out and I am going to do it."

"Stop!" said General Randolph, as Thorne began to send the message



"Silence, Sir," Thundered Randolph.

"Sergeant, seize that man and keep him from that machine."

Well, the last hope was gone. As the sergeant stepped forward to execute his orders, Thorne, desperately determined to the last, clicked out a letter, but he was cut short in the middle of a word. The sergeant and two men dragged him away, chair and all, from the table, and two others posted themselves in front of the key.

"I will have you court-martialed for this, sir," said General Randolph angrily.

"You will have to answer yourself," cried Thorne, playing the game to the last, "for the delay of a dispatch of vital importance, sent by the secretary of war."

"Do you mean that?" cried Randolph.

"I mean just that," answered Thorne, "and I demand that you let me proceed with the business of this office. Before these officers and men I repeat that demand."

"By what authority do you send that dispatch?"

"I refer you to the department, sir."

"Show me your orders for taking charge of this office."

"I refer you to the department, sir," answered Thorne stubbornly.

"By God, sir!" continued General Randolph hotly. "I will refer to the department. Leave your men on guard there, sergeant. Go over to the war office. My compliments to the secretary of war, and ask him if he will be so good as to—"

But Arrelford's evil genius prompted him to interpose again. When affairs were going to his liking he should have let them alone, but fate seemed to be playing into his hand, and he determined to make the most of it and the chance.

"Another witness! Miss Varney,"

Her eyes flashed quickly from the vindictive yet triumphant face of Arrelford, whom she loathed, to the pale, composed, set face of Thorne, whom she loved, and her glance fell upon his wounded left wrist, tied up, the blood oozing through the bandage.

A wave of sympathy and tenderness filled her breast. He was hurt, suffering—that decided her.

With one brief, voiceless prayer to God for guidance, she turned to General Randolph, and it was well that she spoke when she did, for the pause had become insupportable to Thorne at least. He had made up his mind to relieve the dilemma and confess his guilt so that the girl would not have to reproach herself with a betrayal of her lover or her cause, that she might not feel that she had been found wanting at the critical moment. Indeed, Thorne would have done this before but his duty as a soldier enjoined upon him the propriety, the imperative necessity, of playing the game to the very end. The battle was not yet over. It would never be over until he faced the firing party.

And then Edith's voice broke the silence that had become so tense with emotion.

"Mr. Arrelford is mistaken, General Randolph," she said quietly. "Captain Thorne has the highest authority in this office."

Arrelford started violently and opened his mouth to speak, but General Randolph silenced him with a look. The blood of the old general was up, and it had become impossible for anyone to presume in the least degree. Thorne started, too. The blood rushed to his heart. He thought he would choke to death. What did the girl mean?

"The highest authority, sir," continued Edith Varney, slowly drawing out the commission, which every one but she had forgotten in the excitement, "the authority of the president of the Confederate States of America."

Well, she had done it for weal or for woe. She had made her decision. Had it been a wise decision? Had she acted for the best? What interest had governed her, love for Thorne, love for her country, or love for her own peace of mind? It was in the hands of General Randolph now. The girl turned slowly away unable to sustain the burning glances of her lover and the vindictive stare of Arrelford.

"What's this?" said General Randolph. "Umph! A major's commission. In command of the telegraph department. Major Thorne, I congratulate you."

"That commission, General Randolph!" exclaimed Arrelford, his voice rising, "let me explain how she—"

"That will do from you, sir," said the general, "you have made enough trouble as it is. I suppose you claim that this is a forgery, too—"

"Let me tell you, sir," persisted the secret service agent.

"You have told me enough as it is, Sergeant, take him over to headquarters."

"Fall in there!" cried the sergeant of the guard. "Two of you take the prisoner. Forward March!"

Two men seized Arrelford, and the rest of them closed about him. To do the man justice, he made a violent struggle and was only marched out at the point of the bayonet, protesting and crying:

"For God's sake, he's in the Yankee secret service! He'll send that dispatch out. His brother brought in the signal tonight!"

All the way down the corridor, he

foremost bulked largest before him the plan for which he had made all this sacrifice, which had promised to end the weary months of siege which Richmond and Petersburg had sustained. His brother had lost his life, he more than suspected, in the endeavor to carry it out, and now he had failed. That was a natural humiliation and reproach to his pride, although as his mind went back over the scene he could detect no false move on his part. Of course his allowing his love for Edith Varney to get the mastery of him had been wrong under the circumstances, but that had not affected the failure or success of his endeavors.

And his thoughts also were for the woman. He knew that she loved him, she had admitted it, but once his eyes had been opened, he could have told it without any admission at all. All that he had suffered, she had suffered, and more. If she would be compelled to apologize for him, she would also be compelled to assume the defensive for him. She loved him and she was placed in the fearful position of having to deal the blow. The words which would presently fall from her lips would complete his undoing. They would blast his reputation forever and send him to his death. He knew they would not be easy words for her to speak. He knew that whatever his merit or demerit, she would never forget that it was she who had completed his ruin; the fact that she would also ruin the plan against her country would not weigh very heavily in her breaking heart against that present personal consideration—after a while maybe but not at first. And therefore he pitied her.

He drew himself erect to meet his fate like a man and waited. The wait was a long one. Edith Varney was having her own troubles. She knew as well as anyone the importance of her testimony. She had come from the commissary general's vacant office and had been back at the window long enough to have heard the conversation between General Randolph and the two men. She was an unusually keen-witted girl and she realized the situation to the full.

Her confidence in her lover had been shaken, undermined, restored, and shaken again, until her mind was in a perfect whirl. She did not know, she could not tell whether he was what he seemed to be or not. It seemed like treachery to him, this uncertainty. It would be a simple matter to corroborate Mr. Arrelford at once, and it occurred to her that she had no option. But coincident with the question flashed into her mind something she had forgotten which made it possible for her to answer in another way. Thus, she understood that the life of her lover hung upon her decision.

Her eyes flashed quickly from the vindictive yet triumphant face of Arrelford, whom she loathed, to the pale, composed, set face of Thorne, whom she loved, and her glance fell upon his wounded left wrist, tied up, the blood oozing through the bandage.

A wave of sympathy and tenderness filled her breast. He was hurt, suffering—that decided her.

With one brief, voiceless prayer to God for guidance, she turned to General Randolph, and it was well that she spoke when she did, for the pause had become insupportable to Thorne at least. He had made up his mind to relieve the dilemma and confess his guilt so that the girl would not have to reproach herself with a betrayal of her lover or her cause, that she might not feel that she had been found wanting at the critical moment. Indeed, Thorne would have done this before but his duty as a soldier enjoined upon him the propriety, the imperative necessity, of playing the game to the very end. The battle was not yet over. It would never be over until he faced the firing party.

And then Edith's voice broke the silence that had become so tense with emotion.

"Mr. Arrelford is mistaken, General Randolph," she said quietly. "Captain Thorne has the highest authority in this office."

Arrelford started violently and opened his mouth to speak, but General Randolph silenced him with a look. The blood of the old general was up, and it had become impossible for anyone to presume in the least degree. Thorne started, too. The blood rushed to his heart. He thought he would choke to death. What did the girl mean?

could be heard yelling and struggling. General Randolph paid not the slightest attention to him. He stepped over to the telegraph table beside which Thorne stood—and with all the force of which he was capable the young man could hardly control the trembling of his knees.

"Major Thorne," he said reprovingly as Thorne saluted him, "all this delay has been your own fault. If you had only had sense enough to mention this before we would have been saved a damned lot of trouble. There's your commission, sir." He handed it to Thorne, who saluted him again as one in a dream. "Come, gentlemen," he said to his officers, "I can't understand why they have to be so cursed shy about their secret service orders! Lieutenant Foray!"

"Yes, sir."

"Take your orders from Major Thorne."

"Yes, sir," returned Foray.

"Good night," said the general, forgetful of the fact apparently that Edith Varney was still standing by the window.

"Good night, sir," answered Thorne. Foray moved over to the table at the right, while Thorne leaped to his former position, and his hand sought the key. At last he could send his message, there was nothing to prevent him or interrupt him now, he was in command. Could he get it through? For a moment he forgot everything but that, as he clicked out the call again, but he had scarcely pressed the button when Edith Varney stepped to his side.

"Captain Thorne," she said in a low voice, giving him the old title.